

# **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS**

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## **Introduction/Overview**

By nature, the planning process blends many diverse interests into a common vision. Harford County's Master Plan, along with the Land Use Element Plan, is intended to set the overall framework for the County's policies on land use and related issues. These documents will guide the direction of the County's planning efforts during the coming decade. The County's comprehensive zoning process is guided by the policies and directions established by these plans. This process establishes land uses that will be permitted in a given area. Ultimately, the policies and programs set forth under the Master Plan and Land Use Element Plan are implemented through the Zoning Code and the Capital Improvement Program.

Public participation is a critical element of long range planning in Harford County. The goal of the public participation process is to obtain input from citizens in order to build a mutual consensus. A successful public participation process involves a great deal of preparation. It begins by establishing a date, time and location that provides the best opportunity for broad-based attendance. Once the time and venue are determined, extensive efforts are made to notify residents, civic organizations, businesses, and special interest groups in all communities. Advertisements and other notifications of opportunities to participate are created and publicized. The process may include offering presentations to specific groups in order to inform and educate them regarding issues of special interest to their members. The Internet is another advertising and educational tool utilized during this process. Ultimately, input is received from the participants on an array of topics pertaining to the proposed vision or plan. When appropriate, interactive questionnaires and feedback sheets can be developed and the public's input may be displayed on the County's website.

Public involvement is the part of the planning process where citizens have the opportunity to help set the direction for future growth and resource management. Since 1999, citizens have been participating in developing the long-range visions for their neighborhoods by participating in community "visioning" sessions, or workshops. Harford County has conducted community workshops in Edgewood, Joppa/Joppatowne, and Fallston – for the U.S. Route 1 corridor area. Additional workshops were held for the Perryman area, and the U.S. Route 40 corridor. These sessions helped develop consensus on the physical character, appropriate intensity, and street design desired by the community, and are integrated into the Master Plan and Land Use Element Plan.

As part of the Zoning Code update, Harford County intends to provide timelier project notification thereby improving the opportunity for public participation. In addition, the County intends to utilize other public participation venues such as the Community Councils, focus groups, workshops, surveys and other public involvement techniques to enhance opportunities for participation.

## **Master Plan and Land Use Element Plan Process**

The development of the 2004 Master Plan and Land Use Element Plan was predicated on providing ample opportunities for public input from all sectors of the community. In March and April of 2003, a series of four kick-off meetings were held in different areas of the County, to inform the public about the Plan update process and solicit input on what citizens believed were the main issues to be addressed by the plan. All of the information provided at the meetings was made available on the Internet along with comment forms.

Citizens were asked to comment on six topical areas: Designated Growth Areas, Redevelopment and Revitalization, Community Facilities, Preservation, Natural Resources, and Economic Development. The results of these sessions were then tabulated and the top five issues in each category were identified.

The next step involved another series of workshops held in May and June of 2003. Once again, four sessions were held in different areas of the County. At these workshops, the public was provided with information regarding the topics identified by the attendees of the kick-off sessions. Maps, data, community plans and visions, strategic plans, policy guides, and other management tools were displayed so the public could understand what information the County relies on to address these issues.

Citizens were then asked a series of questions concerning the identified issues. The questions were designed to establish goals the public would like to see achieved, and what measures government and business could undertake to address their concerns. Citizens were also asked what they would be willing to do, themselves, to improve the situation. Participants in these sessions were also asked to comment on their communities – identifying what they like most and least, and what ideas or suggestions they had to improve the quality of life in their community.

In addition to the kickoff meetings and workshops, citizens were able to provide input via the Internet. All of the comments received at meetings, workshops or through the Internet were posted on the County's webpage. Information gathered was then used to develop a draft Plan that clearly identified and addressed the issues citizens had raised.

The Plan includes a series of issues, policies, and implementation strategies. Each element of the Growth Management and Resource Conservation portion of the plan addresses the top issues identified during the public participation process. Each issue identified in the Plan is presented exactly in the terms as submitted by the public. The policies and implementation strategies put forth in this Plan are based in part on the public's recommendations. From these meetings it was determined that there is strong support for improving the programs that protect the County's agricultural lands, finding alternative funding mechanisms to address schools, traffic, and open space needs, and taking measures to protect the County's natural and historic resources.

A draft plan was released for public review in October 2003. Comments on the draft plan were solicited in several ways. The first opportunity involved a series of roundtable sessions conducted in November and December of 2003. The Department of Planning and Zoning, along with the Planning Advisory Board (PAB), held six roundtable sessions – one in each County

Council district. These meetings began with a presentation about the Plan. Participants were then assigned to smaller work groups where they were given an opportunity to talk one-on-one with Planners concerning the proposed Plan. These sessions provided citizens with an opportunity to identify what they thought was best about the Plan and what items were missing or not sufficiently addressed. All of the information and materials presented at the public meetings was also available on the County's website.

Following these sessions, information gathered was synthesized and a final draft Plan was developed. This Plan was presented to the County Council, and one countywide public hearing was held to receive citizen's comments on the draft Plan.

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